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Wesley McNair

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Formal Remarks by Maine Poet Laureate Wesley McNair  
for Poetry Day at the Blaine House  
April, 2014

Thank you very much, Julie, and thank you all for coming today. As I believe I've told a couple of you, the comedian Billy Crystal recently said that there are three ages of man. There's childhood, manhood, and you-look-fantastic.

And I think you'll all agree that I look fantastic. The reason is that I get the chance today to introduce a new initiative in poetry, which is called "Imagination 101: Poetry in the Schools."

Each year, I roll out a new, statewide initiative here at the Blaine House, with the general goal of bringing poetry to the people of Maine, especially to those outside of literary circles. My ongoing partner in these initiatives is the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance. headed by Joshua Bodwell – and this is the fourth one.

A little context: We started back in 2011 with a newspaper column called "Take Heart: A Conversation in Poetry" – a previously published poem each week for newspapers, now in 31 Maine newspapers with a combined circulation of 250,000 readers, and last year, I put the initial two years of the column into an anthology called *Take Heart: Poems from Maine*, published by Down East Books.

The second statewide initiative, as you may recall, was the Maine Poetry Express based on the old Grange Hall model of poetry readings by ordinary citizens. So at 14 stops across Maine, two area poets were joined by ordinary townspeople – lobstermen, grocery clerks, first selectmen, and so on – stood up and recited a couple of Maine poems from anthologies I've edited, saying why they chose their poems and what the poems meant to them personally. I'm happy to announce that this fall, there will be a new run of the Maine Poetry Express that'll be Kicked-off by Linda Lord at the Maine State Library.

My third initiative, still underway, is called "Poets in Public," and its purpose is to put Maine poets on YouTube and on a specially created website, reading and discussing their work, so people in our state and well beyond can find the work of Maine poets by the click of a mouse.

So now, initiative number four, Imagination 101, with the goal of bringing new approaches to educators and students of poetry. This initiative involves two separate projects. The first is called "Written Word, Spoken Word, and Hip-Hop," and it reverses the normal approach to poetry in the schools. Normally, the teacher brings in a local poet, the poet reads some poems, and the students ask questions, sometimes prepped beforehand. Essentially, it's a top-down approach, whereas the approach of "Written Word, Spoken Word, and Hip-Hop" is bottom up, making use of sources in poetry that students already know.

We wring our hands about how our kids spend their time with video and other electronic distractions, and I admit they may not read as much as kids used to, but they haven't in the end abandoned words and they haven't abandoned poetry, either. It's just that their sources of poetry are unfamiliar to many of us. I'm hoping though this project to make teachers more comfortable with those new sources, so they can bring them into the classroom and make them part of the fun and engagement of poetry.

So I've assembled, with the help of Gibson Fay-LeBlanc, a team of three poets who'll be touring a set of pilot schools in Maine, performing, demonstrating, and working with students and teachers. They'll be starting next month, and continuing in the fall. At the same time, we'll be growing a website that includes videos of the work they do, and lessons for the classroom, and we'll make the website available to schools in general throughout the state in the coming year.

So let me now introduce the members of the poetry team so they can give us a short performance, and tell you more about their upcoming activities. Come on up here, team.

First and foremost, there's Gibson Fay-LeBlanc – he's the tall guy, whose head looks like mine. Gibson has been crucial to this whole enterprise, calling meetings, and setting their agenda, and leading our discussion. He's the group's – what? – traditional poet, or page poet, and he has an award-winning book of poems to his credit, plus publications in many national journals. I should add that he brings to his work in the schools his experience at the Telling Room in Portland, where he was Executive Director.

Then there's Eric Axelman, who's our hip-hop representative, based in Providence, Rhode Island. Eric's a rapper with two CDs of his original work. On top of that, he's actually taught hip-hop for the past few years in high schools in Providence, so like Gib, he adds to his strengths as a performer his strengths as a teacher.

Last and by no means least is Lady Zen – I introduce her by her performance name, which she also goes by off the stage, sometimes abbreviated to Lady Z, or just Z. Lady Zen is a Brazilian spoken word artist who's performed her work quite literally across the country in venues where she's combined spoken word with music fusion to create a unique approach called "jazz funk." She's now based in Portland, where she's enrolled in the Stonecoast MFA program..

So, Gib, I now turn it over to you....

....With thanks to Gibson and Eric and Lady Z, I now turn to the second part of Imagination 101, called "Letters Between Poets."

I've been working on this project for students and teachers with Colby College Special Collections during the whole time I've been Poet Laureate so we could announce it on this day. It's a website that contains my correspondence with a mentor, Donald Hall, during my early years as a poet, from the early 1970s until the

publication of my first book and its critical reception in 1984, and today we mark the official launch of this website.

These letters were crucial to my development. I was struggling to be a poet and by his advice and guidance, Don helped me to become one. The correspondence includes conversation about poems in progress, publication and how to go about it, discouragement in moments of artistic failure, and the meaning of the writing life.

There are lots of ways to access the letters. You can read them in their entirety, of course, but you can also click on a particular chapter that might interest you: there are seven unfolding chapters, each with its own story. Or, you can access the letters by themes. Click on one of the 30-plus themes and you're taken to a set of the relevant letters. There's a keyword search for custom searches, and a list of poem titles you can click on to see how our conversation about the poems influenced the final versions. There are even manuscript samples of poems in formation. In short, "Letters Between Poets" gives teachers and students in Maine and elsewhere a unique way to understand how poems are created, how they find their readers, how poets think about their craft, and finally, how an artistic relationship between a mentor and a student actually works. As I say, the website is especially for students and teachers, but it'll likely have its value to developing writers and the general public as well.

At this point, I want to ask Patricia Burdick, who's head of Special Collections at Colby College, to say a few words about the website. Before I do, though, I want to thank Pat for the thinking, the meetings, the emails, the staff time, she's invested in this project over three-plus years, making it a priority because of her belief that the archives in her care shouldn't be kept in a closet but instead shared with the public for their educational value.

So thank you, Pat. In my opinion, there's nobody in Special Collections in this state who can match your energy and the quality of your work. I know that comment will embarrass you, but I can't help it. Will you all please welcome to the podium Pat Burdick.

....Thank you, Pat. Before we get to our grand finale, which is a recitation by this year's Poetry Out Loud winner for the state of Maine, I want to recognize a few people who've championed poetry over the past year. Josh, could you please bring up this year's keepsake?

Josh Bodwell, the Executive Director of the Maine Writers and Publisher's Alliance, has designed, with the help of his partner, Tammy Ackerman. this beautiful, limited edition broadside, displaying a poem I've written for spring about rhubarb alongside, as you see, that elegant stalk of rhubarb. Please hold your applause for these honorees until I've named the last one, and to the honorees, could you raise your hand when I say your name? We'll have your broadsides for you at the end of today's program.

I'll be brief, and in fact I can be brief about the first recipient, Pat Burdick, because I've already introduced her and praised her, so you all know perfectly well who she is, and why she must on this list.

So I'll just say how glad I am to thank Pat in this formal way for her help with the Letters Between Poets website, and all the other educational links she's created on my site at Colby.

And thanks also to my next recipient, Erin Rhodes, for her help on the Colby site. Erin is the Archives Education Coordinator of Colby College Special Collections, and she's been the central force in preparing the "Letters Between Poets" website, scanning the letters, coordinating them, creating and editing text, and collaborating with Colby ITS to put the site online, with all its bells and whistles. So here's to you, Erin. Thank you.

And here's to my special consultant Gibson Fay LeBlanc as well. As you saw earlier, Gib is the gifted leader of the poetry team that will soon be touring Maine high schools. For several months, Gib has also been in charge of the logistics for my *Take Heart* poetry column and he's been in on the planning for all my recent initiatives as poet laureate. So at last, Gib, I have the chance to thank you with this keepsake.

Then there's Maryli Tieman. Maryli, in case you didn't know, is the founder of the well-known annual Longfellow Days celebration in Brunswick, a series of events which brings together each February poets, scholars and the general public to honor Maine's best-known poet. So Maryli, for all your inspired, and largely thankless planning, meeting, publicizing and introducing for Longfellow Days over several years, I thank you with this broadside.

Speaking of Longfellow, Michael Steere of Down East Books (Michael will be publishing next month a new book called *The Quotable Longfellow*, for which I'm proud to say I wrote the introduction. This alone might be worth the gift of a broadside, but he's also about to reprint the first *Take Heart* anthology, now nearly sold out, and then he'll go on, in 2015, to publish my second *Take Heart* anthology. That makes three books celebrating Maine poets in three years, and with the reprint, 4 books. So I want to recognize Mike.

And there's another Maine editor on my list today, who is Alice Persons, the publisher and co-founder of Moonpie Press. Since its inception in 2003 Moonpie Press has published over 60 books and chapbooks of poetry. In the time I've been talking up here, Alice may already have published another one. She's also brought 6 poetry anthologies into print. So Alice, this is to recognize your ongoing commitment to Maine poetry.

And now I turn to my primary library partner, Linda Lord, the director of the Maine state library, who, as it turns out, is also deeply committed to poetry. Linda Lord has made available each week on her website for library patrons the poems of my *Take Heart* column, and posted there each year my remarks on poetry at the Blaine House, and moreover, has schemed with me to kick off the 2014 run of the Maine Poetry Express at the

state library this fall. With this broadside I celebrate our ongoing partnership.

And at this point we're almost finished, but I press on a bit longer, because as I said last year, it takes a village to bring poetry to Maine, and by recognizing some of the first citizens of that village, we help to develop and expand it. So just few more honorees.

For instance, two more librarians, the first of them, Tammy Rabideau, of the Waterville Public Library. Last year, as part of the Maine Poetry Express, Tammy and her library committee sponsored a wonderful poetry contest for poets of all ages, from kids to adults, and this year, she's made that community contest an annual event, the only annual competition of its kind in Maine. So this keepsake's for you, Tammy.

And there's also one for Deborah Bowman, director of the library on Chebeague Island. Deb would resist the title I'm going to give her right now, but it's perfectly appropriate. She is the coordinator of the Chebeague Island poetry group that meets in her library, the only group I know of in the whole state that meets every week to discuss – not write, mind you, but simply to discuss – poetry, all of which Deb emails or hand-delivers to group members.

Deb actually wrote me in a recent note that each week's poetry, and the group's discussions of it, help to get her out of bed in the morning. You've got to love that. I do, anyway. So Deborah, this keepsake's for you, and for your group also, to honor your unique, weekly, shared pursuit of poetry.

Just three more broadsides to hand out, and two of them are also shared by a group – first, the Maine Humanities Council, which has declared poetry one of its priorities for support, so poetry projects across the state have enjoyed the MHC's funding, including the Maine Poetry Express. But here's the thing: the Council has also gone about the business of weaving poetry into virtually all of its humanities programs, including the ones dealing with literature and medicine, domestic violence, and its new program for war veterans. So I'm glad to recognize today Hayden Anderson, Executive Director of the Council and Elizabeth Sinclair, Director of the Center for the Book and Programs Officer.

And thanks to Julie Richard and her crew at the Maine Arts Commission which sponsors this very event every year, and has helped to fund my annual coaching sessions for Poetry Out Loud three years in a row, not to mention the dozens of poetry presentations I've done since I started, in all corners of Maine. Without their support, none of that would have happened, and this broadside commemorates their invaluable help.

Finally, I want to recognize the support of Joshua Bodwell, Executive Director of the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance. Josh is the miracle worker for all writers in Maine, and certainly for me in all my initiatives as poet laureate, helping in more ways than I could count, including, of course, the designing of broadsides.

And because I didn't think it was quite appropriate to pay tribute to Josh with the same broadside he

designed, I've brought for him a book of poems, *Still to Mow*, by the recently departed NH poet, Maxine Kumin, who may be gone, but now lives on in the voice of her poetry. So Josh, you'll soon be able to listen to that voice in this collection.

And that's it. Just for the record, I've honored today a whole disparate gang of teachers and performers, archivists, editors and publishers, events organizers, librarians, students of poetry, and funders and promoters of it. And there are so many others, some of them right here in this room, who are champions of poetry. So let it never be said that poetry in Maine is the property of a small literary elite. In this state, poetry belongs to all of us. Could we have a round of applause for these honorees?

Well, you've been very patient, but the moment has finally arrived for the event we've all been waiting for: that is, a reading of poems by the 2014 winner of the Maine Poetry Out Loud Competition, Charlotte Feinberg. Charlotte, is a senior at Gorham High School, and she's accompanied today by her proud parents, Melanie and Robert Feinberg. Just so you know, Mr. and Mrs Feinberg, we all share your pride in Charlotte.

Charlotte's teacher, Kelly Herlihy, couldn't be here today, but she sent along these words to describe her.

"Charlotte cares deeply about words, her own and others, and often will seek me out during her free periods to chat about the latest poem she's trying to revise....Last year, she organized an event for cancer survivors and their families at the Maine Medical Center. She asked local students and community members who'd been affected by cancer to write about their experiences. Then, she planned a reading where some of these writers read their work for survivors and their families at Maine Medical."

So you see Charlotte cares about people as well as words. Today, she's going to share with us a poem she recited at the Poetry Out Loud finals and one of her own original poems. Please welcome Charlotte Feinberg.

....Thank you, Charlotte – you're an inspiration. Good luck in Washington, DC. And thank you all for coming to Poetry Day at the Blaine House.